What comes to mind when you think of opera? Goofy characters? Overly dramatic characters? You may have said romance and love which, in this case, would be correct since Giuseppe Verdi’s La Traviata explores young love and loss. This is somewhat unusual considering that most of his well-known operas explore the dichotomy of good and evil in their characters. Notably, the love duo finds themselves surrounded by members of the upper classes of society in the Paris of the 19th century, so you can expect to see lavish costumes and beautiful rooms in the performance.

There are three main characters in La Traviata: Violetta and Alfredo, the lovers, and Alfredo’s father, Giorgio, who is opposed to their being together. There are other characters too—Violetta and Alfredo both have many acquaintances in the story. Some of the scenes, particularly the first scene, feature many people at once, and it can be difficult keep track of the characters and what is happening in the scene.

Several men who are significant in the story appear in the opening party scene:

- Gastone, a viscount and a friend of Alfredo who brings him to the gathering.
- Alfredo, a member of the bourgeoisie from the countryside who is in love with Violetta. He is one of the two main characters.
- Douphol, a baron who is Violetta’s lover at the beginning of the story.

Other characters in the scene are Flora, Violetta’s friend, Doctor Grenvil, and the Marquis of Obigny, another nobleman.

1. **There are many people on stage during the first scene. Do you think you could name each character while watching it?**
2. How could the characters' titles and rank play into the situation in the opening scene?

3. Look at the image on the right... What do you notice about it? There's a woman, but do you observe anything else about the image?
**BREAKING THE OPERA INTO PARTS**

Opera composers around the time of Verdi organized operas in one of two ways—either the work was through-composed, meaning each act written as a continuous unit of music, or split into sections called numbers. Musicians refer to the latter as a number opera: in rehearsals, everyone will refer to a particular part of the opera by its number (“Let's begin rehearsal with No. 6.”). All of Verdi’s operas except for the last two were number operas. *La Traviata* is a number opera but also shares some features with through-composed opera, particularly in how multiple movements can exist in each number.

In *Traviata*, a change in number usually signifies a change in scene—particularly the entrance or exit of a principal singer or the chorus. This was typical of the *bel canto* period of opera, which were produced roughly from 1600s until the early 1900s and is Italian for beautiful singing. In some earlier works, like the operas of Mozart, apart from finales, each number contained solely a new aria or ensemble piece. But in the *bel canto* era, composers began using numbers to demarcate new scenes (or *scena* in Italian) that could contain several different parts.

A number can include arias, ariosos, duets, trios, quartets, and more. Another possible element of a scene is the recitative which is a speech-like stretch of music designed to advance the plot.

In an ensemble, two or more people sing together on stage. From the beginning until the end of each act of the opera, you will hear mostly *duets* sometimes the composer adds other voices or the chorus into the mix. Ensembles fall into the musical number category, and each one focuses on either a specific state of emotion felt by the characters or some kind of continuous dramatic action. But not all musical numbers involve many characters singing at once: characters can also sing solo for an extended period of time in a special kind of musical number called an *aria* or air.

As opera developed in the 18th and 19th centuries, composers gradually employed large choruses in their operas, making them more important to the music and story. *La Traviata* contains multiple fantastic examples of this: immediately after the prelude, the curtain opens and the opera begins with a scene that heavily involves the chorus. Shortly thereafter comes the drinking chorus, called a *brindisi*, which is followed by a waltz. The purpose of all of this is to introduce the main characters, their relationships, and the story’s premise.

Occasionally, you may notice the orchestra playing less and the characters "sing-talking," or singing in a manner that sounds like they are talking to each other. This is called *recitative*, or recit for short. Recits are more freeform than the other music in the opera. They help advance the dramatic plot and drive the story forward.

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*Can you distinguish between the arias/ensembles and the recitatives in the music? What do you believe is happening in each scene?*
You may have heard the word overture before. The overture is music played at the beginning of an opera by the orchestra without any singing. It prepares the audience for the opera. However, Verdi did not compose an overture for La Traviata; he instead composed a prelude (you may need to turn up the volume for this one because it begins very quietly), which is shorter and was common during his time. Sometimes these preludes introduce musical ideas and themes which return later in the opera. Verdi’s prelude utilizes the melody of Violetta’s ‘Amami, Alfredo’ (Love me, Alfredo!) In the second act. He also reuses the opening moments with quiet strings in the prelude to Act III to depict the quietness surrounding Violetta as she nears death.

*Can you hum along with the prelude? Do you find any of the musical gestures particularly interesting?*

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**LA TRAVIATA: A DERIVED WORK**

An opera is a musical work composed for singers: thus, it consists of both words and music. Typically, the words and music are written by a team of two people, the librettist and the composer. The librettist writes the words and poetry and, later, the composer sets the words to music.

It is also common for the dramatic plots in operas to be taken from preexisting stories, plays, and books written by others. The story for La Traviata comes from a book and play written by a Frenchman named Alexandre Dumas (fils). La Traviata’s librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, took elements from Dumas’s story and adapted them for opera.

Taking a story and adapting it to work with music isn't always a one-to-one endeavor: Piave had to change some things. Here are some examples of such:

- Dumas’s book actually begins after Violetta’s death: the narrator learns of a estate sale due to a death. During a viewing of the property, guests take in her belongings with “admiration and astonishment,” indulging in a somewhat voyeuristic glance into her luxurious life. The narrator buys one of her former possessions, a book, from the sale.
Later, Armand (Alfredo in the opera) appears at his door, looking to buy back the book which he gave to her. Instead of accepting money, the narrator offers him the book for free, insisting that they both get to know one another better. Eventually, Armand begins to tell the story of his relationship with Marguerite. Piave used this story, without the framework of the narrator, for the content of the opera.

In the book, the gathering during which Alfredo and Violetta become close is with fewer people. Her house is also smaller. There are other differences, event between the book and the stage adaptation by Dumas. One significant change in the opera is that the Act II scene at Flora’s party happens on the evening directly after the events at Violetta and Alfredo’s country house.

Back in the early days of opera there was no television, radio, or internet. Some had access to musical and theatrical performances as well as music in church, but opera as we know it arrived late in history—composers began to compose operatic-like operas in the 1600s but it wasn’t until the 1700s and arguably the 1800s that it matured into something similar to what we think as opera today. The earliest public opera performances were social events—audiences drank, talked, and gambled through the performance unless something particularly interesting or incredible caught their attention onstage. They also purchased and studied libretti, the lyrics to the opera, beforehand and attended multiple performances to understand the opera.

How would you prepare before attending a performance of an opera?
Violetta Valéry’s salon is one of the premier locales of the Paris demimonde. The party is in full swing as more guests arrive fresh from gambling at the home of Flora, Violetta’s friend and fellow hostess. Violetta bids all her guests to enjoy an evening of delight. Among the attendees is Alfredo Germont, who has enlisted the help of his friend Gastone, a viscount and friend of Violetta, to make the acquaintance of the charming demimondaine. Gastone introduces Alfredo and reveals the depth of the young man’s admiration by citing his faithful daily visits to Violetta’s home while she was recently ill. Violetta takes this opportunity to skewer her companion, Baron Douphol, noting that he had not shown as much zeal as this newcomer. The Baron, understandably, takes an immediate disliking to this young upstart. Glasses are filled and a toast is called for. Gastone approaches first the Baron, who demurs, then Alfredo, who delivers an impassioned toast to love and his hostess “whose eyes enchant us all”. Violetta responds by asserting that love is “a fleeting flower that is born and dies never to return.” She extols pleasure over all as the guests declare that the new dawn will find them still reveling in this pleasure paradise.

Music is heard from the next room and all the guests accept Violetta’s invitation to dance. As she leads them, she is seized by a sudden weakness. She dismisses the incident as ‘nothing’, but urges everyone to avail themselves of the dance floor where she will join them later. Alfredo stays behind out of concern for his fragile hostess. Though she assures him she is feeling better, he warns her that her fast lifestyle will lead to her ruin and suggests that she needs someone to take care of her. Violetta laughs this off and frankly advises Alfredo to flee from her, for she is immune to love. Smarting from this rebuff, Alfredo prepares to leave at once, but Violetta holds him back, proffering him a camellia with instructions to bring it back to her when it has withered—tomorrow. Alfredo’s hope is rekindled and he hurries out.

Violetta’s other guests stream in from the ballroom and exclaim that, as dawn has broken, they must depart to rest themselves for another night of revelry.

Left alone, Violetta contemplates the possibility of her finding true love. Could Alfredo be the man she has secretly dreamed of? Rebellling against this daydream, she declares she must be forever free to live her life of pleasure, going from joy to joy. The sound of Alfredo’s voice serenading her with words of love weakens her resolve momentarily, but she quickly returns to her theme of living and dying in pleasure.

Act II

Scene i

Three months later, Violetta and Alfredo are living together in a country house. Alfredo enters and rhapsodizes over the fact that since Violetta declared her love for him, he feels he is living in heaven. His happiness is disturbed when he finds out from Violetta’s maid, Annina, that her mistress plans to sell all she has to sustain the expense of country life. Alfredo, determined to prevent this, bids Annina to keep their conversation secret from Violetta and goes to Paris.

Violetta receives a party invitation from Flora, but her friend will wait for her in vain. The servant Giuseppe announces the arrival of a gentleman and shows him in. The man quickly identifies himself as the father of the young man who is ‘running to his ruin’ by associating with Violetta. After bridling at the initial insult, Violetta decides to share with Germont her plan to sell all she owns. Germont sees this as evidence her past is making her feel guilty. She declares that the past no longer exists now that she loves Alfredo. Still, Germont wants to ask her to make a sacrifice. He explains that he has
Act III

It is early morning and from her sickbed Violetta orders Annina to open the blinds. Dr. Grenvil enters and examines Violetta, offering hope to the invalid, but telling Annina that her mistress has but a few hours left on this earth. She asks Annina for her box of correspondence and tells her to give half of the money she has left to the poor. Alone, she rereads the letter she has received from Germont, detailing that the duel has taken place with the Baron’s being wounded. Alfredo has gone abroad but will return to her soon to ask her pardon. Germont will accompany him. Violetta despairs that as she waits she can observe how quickly her illness is taking its toll. She says a touching goodbye to the bright memories of the past and petitions God to pardon her and welcome her to his bosom. All is finished.

Annina enters hurriedly and tells Violetta she wishes to prepare her for a joyous surprise. Violetta guesses it: Alfredo has returned. The two fall into each other’s arms as Alfredo promises Violetta that they shall leave Paris and live out their lives together. Her health will return. Overcome with joyous hope, Violetta wants to go to a church to give thanks for Alfredo’s winning streak. ‘Unlucky at love, lucky at cards,’ he says. Violetta and the Baron arrive. When the Baron sees that Alfredo is there, he instructs Violetta not to speak with him. Goaded by Alfredo’s statement that he would use his winnings to go back to the country with ‘one who had been with me, but who ran away’, the Baron is furious. The Baron challenges Alfredo to a game, in which Alfredo’s winning streak continues. As the guests go to dinner, the two exchange ominous words indicating their intent to fight a duel.

Violetta decides her first course of action to keep her promise to Germont is to accept Flora’s invitation with the Baron as her escort. After she dispatches Annina with the note, she writes to Alfredo. He enters, interrupting her. Alarmed at her agitation, he asks to whom she was writing. When he asks to read it, she tells him he must wait until later. He mentions that his father had been at the house and left him a stern letter stating his intention to return later to see his son. This throws Violetta into a panic, fearing that Germont will find her still on the premises. As she leaves, she promises Alfredo she will always be there with him and implores him to love her as she loves him.

Soon a messenger enters bearing a letter for Alfredo ‘from a woman in a carriage’. Alfredo is visibly shaken when he reads the letter that begins: ‘My dear Alfredo, By the time you read this…’ Alfredo’s father enters to comfort his son. He begs him to come back to his family in Provence, but Alfredo is in a fury to confront Violetta. He chances to see the invitation from Flora and suspects Violetta is on her way there. Deaf to his father’s protests he immediately sets out for Paris.

Scene ii

At Flora’s the festivities are already under way. Flora tells the Marquis and Dr. Grenvil that she has invited Violetta and Alfredo—to which the Marquis responds with the information that the two have parted. Violetta is coming to the party with the Baron.

Alfredo arrives alone, to everyone’s surprise. He immediately goes to the gaming tables and exhibits a prodigious winning streak. ‘Unlucky at love, lucky at cards,’ he says. Violetta and the Baron arrive. When the Baron sees that Alfredo is there, he instructs Violetta not to speak with him. Goaded by Alfredo’s statement that he would use his winnings to go back to the country with ‘one who had been with me, but who ran away’, the Baron is furious. The Baron challenges Alfredo to a game, in which Alfredo’s winning streak continues. As the guests go to dinner, the two exchange ominous words indicating their intent to fight a duel.

Violetta returns to the gaming room having asked Alfredo to follow her. She pleads with him to leave at once to avoid the Baron’s anger. Alfredo is defiant, but says he will agree if she promises to follow him. She says that she cannot because someone made her swear an oath to stay away from Alfredo. Alfredo thinks that it must be the Baron who demanded such a promise—Violetta agrees, and when asked even says that she is in love with the Baron. Alfredo calls all the guests to hear him. He describes how Violetta had planned to sell all she owns for his benefit, but that he is glad that he found out soon enough to prevent it. Throwing a purse of money at Violetta’s feet he calls upon all present to witness that he has paid her for her services. The party guests are enraged by this shocking display and demand that he leave. Having discovered where Alfredo had gone, Germont enters. He berates his son for publicly insulting a woman. Alfredo is immediately remorseful. Flora, the doctor, and the guests comfort Violetta as the Baron pledges to avenge the insult and Germont ponders that, though he knows Violetta truly loves Alfredo, he must remain silent.

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